

COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

Dr. John Elmendorf, President, New College
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I wonder how many people are aware of the tremendous temptations presented to your speaker by this occasion. Consider, if you will, the circumstances. Before me sit the graduates of the first class at New College, docile, serene, expectant. For two years you have been variously rebellious, arrogant, intolerant, cynical--and, indeed--creative, imaginative, productive, exciting. You have no rebuttal, not even a Friday issue of the Catalyst. To be sure, you need not listen, but you must attend. Consider, further, that few college presidents--under any conditions--can resist the temptation to preach, to inveigh, to pronounce. And finally consider the traditions of the commencement ceremony, for generations, a platform for those who would advise the young, counsel the innocent and warn the unsuspecting. What an opportunity!

Today, however, I want to innovate, for New College -- as we say in the propaganda -- is an innovating institution. I would like to speak about two aspects of the enterprise we are trying to maintain and you are about to leave, and to speak of them in terms of a concept of maturity which is the necessary goal of any institution which attempts to transform raw material -- human material, in this case -- into a more or less finished product.

The distinguished psychoanalyst and teacher Erik Erikson -- he teaches psychoanalysis at Harvard Medical School and a freshman seminar at Harvard College and finds the two jobs compatible -- has spoken and written a great deal about the life cycle, the intimate, often elusive but, in his eyes, always necessary,

relationships between the various stages of man's growth. In his book "Insight and Responsibility," he speaks of the stage we call adolescence in terms which are relevant here: "Like the trapeze artist, the young person in the middle of vigorous motion must let go of his safe hold on childhood and reach out for a firm grasp on adulthood, depending for a breathless interval on a relatedness between the past and the future, and on the reliability of those he must let go of, and those who will receive him." This is a provocative observation, particularly since we at New College are in the curious position of trying to do something about this young person while he is in the air, and possibly, even, while he is performing one or more full somersaults! Until I came across this passage, I had never properly understood the role of the college nor had I other than the most intuitive reasons to know that the product we were working with was a bit hard to get hold of long enough to affect. Mr. Erikson's image is in a sense a relief, the more so because we have now come to know some of those you have let go of and identified many of the "receivers" and find them both worthy of our trust and yours.

I have spoken several times in the past year or two of virtue, virtue not in a proscribed sense but in broad terms, reminiscent of the Roman concepts of strength, restraint and courage. Erikson concerns himself with virtue in this dimension, attempting to delineate the virtues of these same three stages of childhood, adolescence and adulthood, and cites some rudimentary essences of the three phases. His list is rather long. I would like to extract one element from each period and try to make them relevant to the span of time you have passed here at New College.

The childhood virtue I would select (from four) is: HOPE -- "The enduring belief in the attainability of fervent wishes..." Erikson points out that this is the essential element in the child's personality which links him to those with whom he lives by the constant recognition that his hopes of them are indeed (usually, at least) fulfilled. This, in turn, strengthens him, giving him cause to move from hope to trust, both in others and in himself, and is therefore the genesis of self-confidence and group adjustment. (I will not dwell on the consequences of those hopes which are early unfulfilled.) In the context of this talk, I wanted to point out merely that it was out of this phase of your lives that most of you were chosen to come to New College, that you did have your hopes and that those who chose you believed you were ready to fulfill them.

What, then, of adolescence? Mr. Erikson calls the adolescent virtue "fidelity." Others have termed it loyalty, friendship, identity, but the important aspect of this virtue is that it implies "the ability to sustain loyalties, freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems." The emphasis of this concept is the presence of internalized contradiction and its consequence -- change -- and change made more profound because it grows out of shifting fidelity to real values. Once again, the characteristic mark of your growth during the time you have spent here, is that of behavior founded in change. It has been perplexing, frustrating, maddening at times, to observe apparent contradictions in your acts, attitudes and achievements. It is comforting, somehow, to ascribe these wildly divergent patterns of behaviour to a condition of virtue prompted by fidelity, by a sense of the rightness of things within some value system, no matter that it be not mine!

It will come as no surprise to you to learn that the third virtue, the adult virtue, is love. Now, love is a hard thing to talk about, to write about, to think about. As Fats Waller would have put it: "If you have to ask, you ain't got it." Erich Fromm has written on the Art of Loving and has rather dramatically categorized love as love A, love B, love C, etc., each of them a special attribute, now religious, now sensuous, now platonic, etc. Many others -- from Joan Baez to Paul Tillich -- any good old Harrad hand could expand the list indefinitely -- have tried to analyze or exhaust the subject. Yet we do not always recognize the elements of trust, confidence and faith which are part of that love which is the prime virtue of adulthood. To quote Erik Erikson: "Love is mutuality of devotion, forever subduing the antagonisms inherent in divided functions."

Considering certain events of the past two years, some of you may be surprised to learn that I am in favor of love. It is not very long since college presidents didn't even have to consider their "stand" -- as it were -- on love, but new insights in psychology and newly developed relationships among men have again made love a central concern of man. We see it threatened by ruthless dehumanizing of a society faced with dazzling changes in technology. We see it threatened by wars and the promise of more wars and at the end, the Bomb. And we see it threatened by the sheer numbers of those with whom we must live and to whom we must relate. We try to find answers. And, again, the encouraging note is being struck precisely by you, your generation, somehow aware that your fidelities, your loyalties have been truly served only if they lead you to the possibility of love.

9

I began these remarks by a reference to this institution, to its role as a catalyst in your movement from childhood to maturity. I would conclude by speculating that few of you are very aware of the love which has already been a part of your life, the love -- not only of parents -- but of the many who have helped bring this college into being, who have daily carried on its work, and who now see you prepare to leave, hopeful that you will grow in your ability to love.

I could not complete these remarks without making an observation which may already have occurred to some of you. Erik Erikson is a psychoanalyst, a modern, scientific, Freudian psychologist engaged in intellectual pursuits. He tries to explain human behavior, to understand it in order to affect it. Yet even the most superficial analysis of his list of "human virtues" -- hope, fidelity, love -- the human growth sequence in his terms, will recall another somewhat earlier trio of concepts which have been central to the life of the Western world for nearly 2,000 years. From the 13th verse of the Epistle to the Corinthians: "And now abideth faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love."

It makes you think!